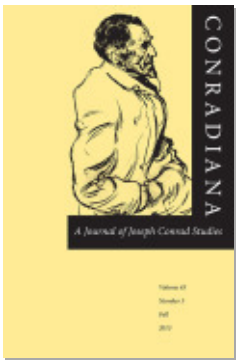
Conrad's Heart of Darkness: A Critical and Contextual Discussion by Cedric Watts (review)



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Cedric Watts. *Conrad's Heart of Darkness: A Critical and Contextual Discussion.* 2nd ed. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. xi+166. ISBN: 978–9042035270

For anyone seriously interested in understanding why Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* continues to be hailed as one of the most influential texts of modernist literature and, perhaps, of Western literature *tout court,* it is a great fortune that Cedric Watts's brilliant study, *Conrad's* Heart of Darkness*: A Critical and Contextual Discussion,* is now available again, in a timely and much-needed second edition, for a new generation of students and scholars to read—and reread.

Given the study at hand, a brief contextual reminder is in order. Watts's book was first published in 1977, prior to the "theory wars" of the 1980s and 90s that turned *Heart of Darkness* into an ideal case study to test a variety of theoretical perspectives; it was actually written in 1971, before Chinua Achebe's critique of Conrad's image of Africa opened up a generative dialogue between modernist and postcolonial studies. Given the copious amount of groundbreaking scholarship *Heart of Darkness* has continued to generate since, the materialization of this second edition already speaks volumes about the scholarly brilliance, hermeneutical sophistication, and longstanding critical validity of Watts's approach. Even theoretically-oriented readers informed by recent developments in contemporary thought will find confirmation that Watts possesses the rare qualities of a Janus-faced critic. This *homo duplex* looks back to cast new light on Conrad's celebrated text about the colonial horrors of the past; and by doing so, he also looks ahead to new pictures of Conrad that are currently reframing the landscape of Conrad studies. As Watts succinctly puts it, "my method . . . is that of one who steps back in order to jump forward" (5).

The far-reaching insights that emerge from Watts's textual and contextual discussion of *Heart of Darkness* stem from a double methodological principle that orients the entire book. Its distinctive feature consists in joining two approaches that have generally been considered in opposition, but that Watts reconfigures as two faces of the same coin. On one side, Watts relies on his hermeneutical sophistication to unveil the numerous "cover plots" (ix) that invisibly in-*form* (i.e., give form to) Conrad's tale from the inside-out. This intrinsic side of Watts's "method" is attentive to formal elements, such as textual paradoxes, framing narrative techniques, mirroring effects between the narrative frame and what it frames, and ironic reversals of perspectives. On the other side, Watts does not confine his discussion within the formal limits of the text, but rather, "repeatedly set[s] the tale in a variety of contexts" (5), thereby reframing textual ambivalences and contradictions from the

outside-in. This second methodological side entails sustained interdisciplinary readings of the psychological, ethical, political, and philosophical layers that envelop Conrad's tale. Above all, it offers informative comparative analyses between *Heart of Darkness* and a wide range of neighboring Conradian, modernist, and classical "contexts."

The originality of this double-oriented approach allows Watts to show that much of what appears, on a first reading, to be "paradoxical" in Conrad's evaluation of civilization, otherness, consciousness, morality, etc. reappears on a "second reading" (40) to follow a carefully crafted logic that is itself the product of Conrad's "astonishing degree of imaginative coordination" (40). Thinking of Conrad's career-long fascination with the *homo duplex,* Watts aptly dubs this method of reading "janiform interpretation" (ix). And since for Conrad "the homo duplex has more than one meaning," Watts sets out to trace not simply its double, but its "protean" and "tentacular" (2) articulations. As he figuratively puts it, "interpreting the tale is in some ways like wrestling with an octopus; we extricate ourselves from one entanglement only to be re-entangled in our new position" (2).

This concise, lucid, and penetrating book was originally written to facilitate a first encounter with *Heart of Darkness* and remains, in my view, one of the most illuminating textbooks to assign to students in the classroom. Still, this textbook is not for students alone. Written by an author who admittedly intends to write about Conrad *usque ad finem,* this book offers precious insights for Conrad scholars who are more than intimately familiar with the secret shadows that inform *Heart of Darkness.* This attention to a readership that is—you will have noticed it—already double is clear from the outset and orients the protean articulations of the whole book.

Following an introduction that explains the key features of "janiformity," Watts starts chapter 2 with a focused discussion of the "ambiguity" (6) generated by the double genitive in the title phrase, *Heart of Darkness.* This chapter offers an exemplary type of close reading that attunes students and teachers alike to the type of critical scrutiny Conrad's tale requires; at the same time, Watts also stretches his reading outside the text to consider the past-oriented temporality of the tale in light of a revealing comparison with the future-oriented temporality of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine,* thereby reflecting on general *fin-de-siècle* cosmic and metaphysical anxieties concerning the future. Chapter 3 follows up with an account of Conrad's use of the convention of the frame narrative, or "oblique narrative" (19), by contrasting the opening scene on the *Nellie* with less complex tales such as *Youth* and "An Outpost of Progress." And in chapters 4 and 5, Watts patiently traces the meandering course of Marlow's narrative itself, from his arrival at the Company's Headquarters to his

final encounter with the Intended, sketching original portraits of key figures and scenes along lines that are not simply realistic or impressionistic, but that inaugurate what Watts calls "absurdist" (59) and "surreal" (67) "descriptive techniques"—from "empirical hyperbole" (59), to "delayed decoding" (60) (Ian Watt's term), to "dwarfing perspective" (61)—that inform Conrad's poetics. In the process, Watts articulates comparative readings that entangle *Heart of Darkness* with other major Conradian texts (from *Lord Jim* to *Nostromo*), modernist intertexts (from Kafka's *The Trial* to Eliot's *The Waste Land*), tracing contextual "echoes" (49) all the way to back to classical texts (from Virgil's *Aeneid* to Dante's *Inferno*). The book concludes with a broader reflection that sums up the tale's major philosophical and psychological implications on various themes, such as "degeneration," the "unconscious," and the nature of "evil," by engaging with influential figures close to Conrad's *Weltanschauung* (from Max Nordau to Bertrand Russell). As the title suggests, then, this may be a book in which *Heart of Darkness* is read in light of different "contexts." And yet, as we follow the course of Watts's argument, we belatedly decode that a mirroring inversion characteristic of janiform interpretation actually ensues and that different contexts—from antiquity to modernity—are actually illuminated by Conrad's text.

Watts writes about *Heart of Darkness* with scholarly rigor, affective participation, and theoretical sophistication, weaving these principles together in what he calls a "labor of love" (xi). Sometimes, he even stretches his janiform approach to ventriloquize Conrad's own possible thoughts on questions of artistic creation, speaking mimetically, that is, in Conrad's own name. For instance, in the context of a discussion of the reasons Conrad's critique of "crowd" psychology in "An Outpost of Progress" does not fully manage to stretch and implicate the modern public, Conrad—that is, Watts—ponders: "Now, how can I develop similar themes in such a way as to undermine complacency, to get under the reader's skin?" (30). Or, later, in a passage that contests common-sense objections to Conrad's absurdist representation of a French ship "firing into a continent" early in the narrative, we hear Conrad's critical shadow echo: "You, the complacent man, take the mediate view, a familiar and conventional notion that what is going on there is purposeful, sensible, logical. Marlow sees the immediate view, and in doing so hints at an ultimate view" (63), that is, a metaphysical view in which the will to power of nature ultimately dwarfs civilization.

These are unusually mimetic passages in Conrad scholarship. They testify to such a complicity between the critic and the artist that I wonder: how can Watts slip so easily under Conrad's skin in view of getting under the readers' skin? This "tentacular" move seems to be grounded on a principle that is at

least dual, for it has a formal and affective side. On one side, such passages offer a subtle indication that, despite the emphasis on "context," the palpitating heart of Watts's reading stems from impersonal, technical, and thus textual insights he brings to light from the inside-out. On the other, more personal side, they testify to Watts's affective resonances with what he calls "Conrad's janiform temperament" (47–8), a protean temperament he uses to illuminate the text from the outside-in. The former side can be taught for it rests on textual passages Watts teaches us to crack open; the latter is beyond teaching and can only be made visible by reading Conrad's darkly-textured tale and Watts's illuminating commentary as part of the same contextual atmosphere.

The detailed articulations of Watt's tentacular reading of *Heart of Darkness* become both visible and audible if we zoom in on specific textual and contextual insights. Particularly noteworthy is Watts's formal attention to the "very complex interaction between inner and outer narrative" (23), which allows him to identify complex mirroring effects between the interior and the inner narrative. For instance, the Accountant of the interior narrative is a character few critics have commented on, for there is apparently not much to say about this silent, impersonal, and anonymous listener. And yet, Watts perceptively points out that this typical figure has a chilling counterpart, or double, in the Accountant of the interior narrative. This formal mirroring effect has far-reaching implications: it brings the "uneasiness" the latter inspires in Africa to bear on what appears, on a first reading, to be a "civil" figure in Europe. Further, in a tentacular articulation that turns formal critique into cultural critique, Watts traces the underlying affective continuities that tie Kurtz to Marlow and Marlow to his Victorian listeners—stretching to include modern readers as well: "The eloquence of Marlow's invocation of Kurtz's eloquence gives a tentacle to Kurtz—his attributed qualities reach out at us through Marlow" (26). This is one of those insights in which Watts the critic focuses so intensely on the text that he metamorphoses into Watts the theorist; both sides join to form a Janus-headed critic as theorist who casts light on the text in order to reflect on the context, in the process he troubles the distinction between text and context, characters and readers, the horror without and the horror within, thereby entangling contemporary readers in horror that we, at first sight, seem to contemplate from a multi-layered narrative and historical distance. If we consider that later on Watts makes us see that the enigmatic phrase "the horror" is voiced by a *homo duplex par excellence—qua* "charismatic leader" on the "popular side"—who functions as an "index to the hollowness of European civilization at large" (96), we realize how close Watts comes to catching a glimpse of what the French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has recently called "The Horror of the West."

Past-oriented and less-developed sides of Watts's approach that render his study vulnerable to critiques concern his take on gender and, most visibly, race. Watts is the first to acknowledge that the terminology he relies on to talk about such delicate matters in identity politics is "sometimes"—and I would stress, *only* sometimes—"deplorable" (x). It would thus be easy for contemporary critics informed by gender studies, critical race theory, and postcolonial theory to zoom in on the missing critiques of the insidious ways patriarchal ideology informs the marginalized feminine figures in the novel, or on the few mentions of ethnocentric terms like "savages" Watts uncritically echoes. I personally take it as a sign of Watts's intellectual honesty and theoretical strength that in this new edition he resisted the temptation to edit these problematic passages. He did so in order to make a larger and, in my view, more untimely theoretical point: namely, that "[r]ewriting history destroys its lesson" (x), and that contemporary critics are unconsciously subjected to ideological blind spots that a subsequent generation of critics will easily unmask.

If future-oriented critics who are currently taking Conrad studies in the epoch of the Anthropocene were to supplement Watts's study along lines that do not simply offer yet another echo of Achebe's critique of Conrad's image of Africa, but stretch tentacular reading further, the possibilities are manifold. I will limit myself to pointing out three. First, an account of Marlow's protean narrative should stretch to articulate the anthropological implications of the African rituals in the background of the tale which Watts leaves in the dark. Such collective, musical rituals appear racist on a first reading (and they certainly remain so), but on a second reading attentive to the tale's janiform aesthetics, they can also help us critically reflect on European rituals "on the popular side," which, as the twentieth century will soon realize, can easily take possession of the modern crowd. Such an account might also encourage modern readers who can still "feel the savagery" in them (the past) to reflect on apocalyptic horrors that are not of Africa but are of the West instead (the future)—a tentacle for cultural critics. Second, it would be important to recognize that these frenzied rituals do not simply have a contextual referent in Europe, but stretch in order to inform seemingly antithetical postcolonial African texts, most notably Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart.* If we adopt janiform lenses and move beyond polarized idelogical debates and authorial rivalries that dominated the past decades, we notice that, when it comes to images of "frenzy," these two seemingly antithetical texts can be reframed as two sides of the same picture of Africa—a tentacle for postcolonial critics. Finally, Watts's concluding philosophical reflections would gain from being supplemented by a recent turn in Conrad studies. Writing from different perspectives, continental philosophers such as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and

Adriana Cavarero have recently reframed Conrad's tale as a "classic of horrorism" that can help new generations of critics to reflect on "the horror of the West"—from the Holocaust to the violence of global terrorism. Such a reading would articulate a metaphysic of violence along lines directly relevant for the contemporary moment; it would also confirm a lesson Watts outlines from the very beginning: namely, that "One reason for the work's enduring force is its critical anticipation of twentieth-century preoccupations" (6) and beyond—a tentacle for Janus-faced critics *qua* theorists.

These are just some tentacles, but there is an entire octopus articulated in this book. Any reader who will wrestle with it will not only remain entangled in Conrad's most protean tale; she will also soon discover this is a study that continues to contribute to the growth of Conrad studies in the twenty-first century. Personally, after rereading Cedric Watts's *Conrad's* Heart of Darkness*: A Critical and Contextual Discussion,* I was left with the general impression that with all due proportion kept one can say of this study the same thing Watts says of Conrad's tale, albeit at one remove: "I realized that I would need to read it again and again if I hoped to comprehend it adequately" (ix). This second edition offers students, teachers, and scholars alike a timely opportunity to step back to this admirable study—in order to leap ahead.

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Wiesław Krajka, Ed. *From* Szlachta *Culture to the 21st Century, Between East and West. New Essays on Joseph Conrad's Polishness.* Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, 2013; Boulder, CO: Eastern European Monographs, 2013; New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. $75.00 (hardcover)

This volume of essays is the twenty-second and final volume in the series *Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives,* edited by Wiesław Krajka, a collaboration between Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press and *Eastern European Monographs.* The articles were presented in earlier versions at the Fifth International Joseph Conrad Conference at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland in 2011. The collection is organized into two parts. Part I, "From *Szlachta* Culture to the 21st Century," examines issues of Polish history, culture, and literature. Part II, "Between East and West," enlarges the frame of inquiry to include the reception history of Conrad in Russia, the Ukraine, and Germany. One theme connecting the essays in this volume is a reexamination of the boundaries and components of "Polish" identity,